

Extending your reach

Are social networking sites for business now essential tools for sales professionals?

Business social networking sites, such as LinkedIn and Xing, are now reaching a tipping point in membership numbers that make them essential online tools for today's sales professionals. Combined, LinkedIn and Xing have over 10 million business users, ranging from startup entrepreneurs to senior executives within global 2000 companies. LinkedIn, the larger of the two networks, is adding around 1 million new users every 3 months.

In a *Business Week* article last year, Reid Hoffmann, CEO of LinkedIn, said: "In 2003, people thought of us as a weird form of social networking. Now people are saying, 'Oh, I get it. It's a business tool.'" That's exactly it; sites such as LinkedIn are business tools. And the ability to use these tools effectively has become essential for world-class sales performance.

Social networking sites enable salespeople to develop far reaching and powerful networks that can identify prospects, gain buy-in and close deals. For example, on a recent project we were retained to open doors with global telecoms companies. The ideal entry point was at a senior technical level buried deep within the corporate structure. By using our extended social network on LinkedIn (we have direct access to over 5 million users) we were able to uncover business opportunities in excess of \$1 million within hours. On another project, we reached the key decision maker within a 71,000 employee global corporation with one phone call. Imagine doing that though the switchboard.

LinkedIn has contacts in over 147 industries. Unsurprisingly for a tool that has grown out of Silicon Valley, the best represented sectors are IT and telecoms. When we completed a recent project to access IT directors within the UK publishing sector, we were able to quickly identify and engage every contact within our client's wish-list.

Beyond prospecting, social networking sites enable you to gather market intelligence, find strategic partners, leverage referrals within large accounts and build on your reputation as an expert in your sector.

There are a number of fundamentals to consider. Here are five tips to build a strong foundation for your online network.



■ **Upload your contacts** Both LinkedIn and Xing have tools for uploading your contacts to see who you already know on the site. Both sites have very strict privacy policies and your contacts are not shared with anyone. It's quite common for salespeople to be uncomfortable with this step; many are very protective of their contacts. However, if you really want to leverage the power of these tools, you need to "play the game". Once you've found contacts you already know on the site, invite them to connect with you. That's really why everyone is there.

■ **Complete a full profile** Adding companies that you have worked at as well the college you attended is more than about simply filling out an online CV. The more complete your profile, the easier it is for ex-colleagues to find you and connect. LinkedIn has a feature that enables you to search and connect with ex-colleagues and alumni even if you don't have an up-to-date email for them. You can only use this feature if you both have the same company, or college, listed in your profiles. Adding details about your achievements with each company also positions you for potential contacts.

■ **Get endorsed** Once you've uploaded your contacts and started connecting with the people that you know, it's time to add some credibility. LinkedIn has the ability for you to request an endorsement from customers, managers and people who know you. Getting them to endorse you is critical. Remember, when you approach someone online they will always "check you out" before deciding how to respond to your request. Endorsements, particularly by customers, add credibility

and play a large part in whether they accept or decline. And, if the person knows (or knows of) the contact that has endorsed you, you'll begin to see how these online platforms really leverage your network.

■ **Join groups** Online groups are an excellent way to gather information about markets, trends and opportunities. They also provide a platform to promote yourself as an expert in your particular field. Do you sell CRM solutions? Join the CRM and Customer Care group on Xing. In the RFID field? Xing's RFID group has over 1,200 members interested in "general discussion of RFID technology, business cases, implementations and ideas".

■ **Don't spam** Spam has always been a part of online communities. Sending boilerplate messages or joining a group and posting, "Anyone interested in buying business intelligence software?" will position you right at the bottom of the food chain. It's simple: don't do it. Use advance search facilities to target your requests with precision and always create a unique and personal message. If you're genuine, but just a little off-target, most people will help you find the right contact. It is about networking, after all.

This is just the beginning of something that is changing the way people do business. An online social network and profile are essential tools for today's sales professional. And, when you get online, don't forget to look me up. SF

David Regler is a consultant and speaker on leveraging the power of social networking sites in business. See www.davidregler.com